The Last Unicorn: Why Must You Always Speak In Riddles?

47,937 views Jul 12, 2018 The Last Unicorn by Peter S. Beagle is a book of riddles. Nothing is as it seems, and no one will give you a straight answer. But what can be gained from this evasiveness, in being cryptic and deceptive? Why must you always speak in riddles?

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Transcript

It's a well know saying that "a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting its boots on."
So, it's amusingly fitting that the quote itself is so often attributed to the wrong person, and with its wording so different from the earliest recorded variation, and assumed origin.
The tension between truth and myth is central to Peter S. Beagle's 1968 novel The Last Unicorn and the subsequent animated adaptation in 1982, but while the evolution of unicorn mythology mirrors the distortion of Swift's words, for Beagle the distinction between fact and falsehood isn't so simple.
From language obscured by riddles and references to appearances shrouded in disguise and deception,
here truth and fabrication are, as the unicorn describes herself and the harpy, "two sides of the same magic".
In the introduction to the 1978 collection 'The Fantasy Worlds of Peter S. Beagle', Beagle described himself as a "born hider… fascinated all my life by disguise, camouflage, shape-changers,
and everything that has to be approached backwards or sideways."
This sentiment isn't just reflected in The Last Unicorn but seems to be imbedded in it.
In its characters, its narrative, its language.
When the character Molly Gru asks the enigmatic cat: "Why won't you help me? Why must you always speak in riddles?", it's a question that could apply to the book itself.
The Last Unicorn is a novel endlessly shifting between truth and illusion
as, in addition to being a fantasy story, it's also a story about stories and fantasies, a fairy tale about fairy tales.
And while both Schmendrick the magician and Prince Lir comment on the fictions of their own stories, unravelling their own narratives as they unfold, it's the outlaw Captain Cully who directly articulates the fluidity of this fiction, its waxing and waning between truth and tale, saying: "One always hopes, of course, even now--to be collected, to be verified, annotated, to have variant versions, even to have one's authenticity doubted."

And, of course, this is the very state in which the unicorn finds herself.
Unrecognized, overshadowed by her own mythology.
But it's a state that drifts between truth and fantasy, neither entirely one nor the other.
The unicorn is said to be 'real', even more real than the other characters, but Beagle simultaneously undercuts this position in referring to the rhinoceros as "where this whole silly myth got started."
And the animated adaptation draws a similar visual parallel with narwhals, whose horns are documented to have been mistaken for those of unicorns.
Cully equally lives in the shadow of Robin Hood, and even though he claims Robin Hood is a myth, a lie, he's just as much a lie himself.
Fabricating hyperbolic stories about his adventures that bear little resemblance to reality.
This sets up the complicated relationship between truth and illusion, where truth is never the whole truth and illusion can reveal just as much as it hides.
It's a tension that exists in the very language of the novel.
Of course, literature is a medium in which, whether through simile or metaphor, any one thing is almost always also something else. But the duality in the writing of The Last Unicorn is more specific than that.
In a way that often feels closer to poetry than prose, not in its formal style but in its indirect use of words.
Reflecting on the nature of poetry and prose, writer Joyce Carol Oates determined that:
"Prose, it might be speculated, is discourse;
poetry ellipsis.
Prose is spoken aloud; poetry overheard.
The one is presumably articulate and social, a shared language, the voice of 'communication';
the other is private, allusive, teasing, sly…
a kind of witchcraft unfathomable to ordinary minds."
I'm not exactly arguing that The Last Unicorn should be considered poetry, only that it's this poetic description that best articulates its uneasy prose.
Where words playfully hint at meanings and pose cryptic puzzles as much as they tell a story.
Oates derived these distinctions in relation to the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who's work frequently explored the nature of truth and our approach to it.
And it's one of Dickinson's poems that I think best summarizes the linguistic ethos of The Last Unicorn:
'Tell All the Truth, but Tell it Slant'.
But what advantage is there in secrecy, in telling it 'slant'?
Dickinson seems here to regard truth as process, as something to be worked through.
Something gradual, to be approached in circuit, or, as Beagle put it, backwards or sideways.
Because truth is nuanced, mutable, as hard to pin down as illusion.
And to follow the comparison of poetic language as a 'kind of witchcraft', Schmendrick's words could be equally applicable to the writer as to the magician:
"Only to a magician is the world forever fluid, infinitely mutable and eternally new.
Only he knows the secret of change, only he knows truly that all things are crouched in eagerness to become something else, and it is from this universal tension that he draws his power."
And then there are also moments where even 'truth' and 'fantasy' seem to become entirely interchangeable.

When Cully's men mistake the conjured illusion of Robin Hood for the real thing, he derides them as: "Fools, fools and children.
It was a lie like all magic.
There is no such person as Robin Hood.", but Molly responds: "Nay Cully, you have it backward...
There's no such person as you or me or any of us.
Robin and Marian are real, and we are the legend!" In one way this speaks to the hope and ideal that embodies legends, something greater than reality, but with so little distinction between real and imagined it becomes uncannily easy for one to replace the other.
Fiction might seem as though it could envelop reality, devour it and supplant it, if given the chance.
While present in the apparition of Robin Hood, this unease is felt much more intensely with the unicorn's transformation into a mortal body. As this new human form begins to take over: "Now I am two—myself, and this other that you call ‘my lady.’
For she is here as truly as I am now, though once she was only a veil over me.
… If she has no power to heal, or to quiet, still she has another magic."
The idea of losing your identity to a false appearance is a recurring one, and it appears again in the Midnight Carnival: 'creatures of night, brought to light'.
But these mythical beasts are really nothing more than enchanted illusions born from ordinary animals: the Satyr is just a chimp, the Midgard Serpent a snake, and the Manticore a lion.
The mythical figures "loomed hugely over the captives of the Midnight Carnival, and yet they were joined to them: stormy dreams sprung from a grain of truth."
The real animals "faded steadily before the marvelous phantoms, until they were only shadows themselves."
making even the real seem unreal, questionable.
One of Cully's men asserts that: "eyes are easy to deceive and cheats by nature…"
So easy to deceive, in fact, that humans will take a real unicorn for a horse.
Because in Beagle's story, humans can't see unicorns - their eyes aren't deceived by magic or disguise, only by themselves.
As another outlaw continues: "The universe lies to our senses, and they lie to us, and how can we ourselves be anything but liars?"
When writing his own poetry, Lir asks "How many r's in miracle?", to which Schmendrick replies,
"Two. It has the same root as 'mirror'."
Which is false, even in the text of the novel miracle is written with only one 'r'.
But while this exchange might lack technical accuracy, it provides its own truth.
The connection between a miracle and a mirror image.
An illusion based on reality, sprung from a grain of truth.
The unicorn, as a symbol, exists in its retelling, bound to reality by the knowledge that its image derives from that reality.
So, to return to the question 'why must you always speak in riddles?', the cat simply answers that "I am a cat, and no cat anywhere ever gave anyone a straight answer."
And the same is perhaps true of writers, certainly, at least, of poets.
But I think Beagle's riddles are ultimately concerned with honesty.
To speak simply would be to assume simplicity, to deny anything its inherent complexity.

To speak in riddles, to tell it slant, like 'slant' rhymes in poetry that use similar
but not identical sound, acknowledges that things often won't quite fit neatly into place.
Joyce Carol Oates interpreted that truth, in Dickinson's poem is "too much for mankind
to bear head on - like the Medusa it can be glimpsed only indirectly…", but I don't
think this is because the 'truth' is so overwhelming, just that it's so elusive.
Like the Midgard Serpent, wrapped around the earth, or the lightning of Dickinson's poem,
you can't see it all at once - it's something to be worked though, a process.
As Dickinson concludes:
The truth must dazzle gradually,
or every man be blind.
Hey everyone, thanks for watching yet another video essentially dealing with
the line between fantasy and reality.
I feel like if I acknowledge my obsession with this idea here then at least
I'm kind of self-aware.
Thanks again for watching, and I hope I'll see you next time.